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Editorial

Tracing New Occupational Diseases, an Introduction

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This and the next issue of SH@W contain a selection of papers, based on presentations at the International Congress on Tracing New Occupational Diseases in Amsterdam, April 7-8, 2011.

Continuous changes in work and in working conditions give rise to new occupational health risks and possibly to new occupational diseases. Social partners and governments have a need for timely and specific knowledge about new risks. Where there is insufficient knowledge of these risks, opportunities for intervention and prevention are missed. Although a great deal of effort goes into risk assessment, in order to manage the risks brought on by new technologies, signalling new and undesirable side-effects of work on health is a complementary approach. The approach of occupational health and safety vigilance is comparable with analyzing and learning from occupational accidents and identification of the adverse effects of drugs: although drugs have undergone extensive testing for safety in the research phase, they may produce unexpected and sometimes serious adverse health effects after introduction into the market. In society, the need to identify new health risks more quickly and more effectively has grown rapidly over the past decade. The continuous need to identify new risks is a process that involves uncertainty, and on in which a balance must be found between a dynamic approach and a careful approach. The challenge is to prevent any occupational damage to health without creating unnecessary concern. There is a growing impact of chronic work-related health problems, such as musculoskeletal disorders, psycho-social risks, and stress at work. There are fears that nanotechnology risks a repeat of the asbestos tragedy. Reproductive capacity can be endangered by the health problems that can arise when parents-to-be or their unborn children are exposed to risk factors that present in the work environment.

Various methods exist to identify the occurrence of occupational diseases. At times this leads to detection of new occupational health risks. The power and limitation of these methods form the core of this Congress in which organ-system oriented issues and specific new occupational diseases are contested, discussed, and represented in the papers herein.

This Congress was meant to help to create an international network for knowledge exchange in this field. A European consortium is already established; Monitoring trends in Occupational Diseases and New and Emerging Risks Net work (MODERNET). This will make the best possible use of nationally of existing expert groups, as well as promoting the cooperation between institutes of various countries that are charged with the detection and evaluation of new health risks.

A source of inspiration for this Congress was the International Symposium on New Epidemics in Occupational Diseases in Helsinki in 1994 [1] the close collaboration with Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) in the organization of this Congress was very much appreciated.

The Congress was held in the Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It was organized by the Scientific Committee on Occupational Medicine from the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH)

and the Netherlands Center of Occupational Diseases from the Coronel Institute. The Congress was supported by international bodies: International Labour Organization, World Health Organization and European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and the Netherlands Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs.

Reference

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